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Take Me To Your Followers

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Take Me To Your Followers

Abstract

In 1954, Dwight D. Eisenhower, then 34th President of the United States, defined leadership as "... the art of getting someone else to do something that you want done because he wants to do it, not because your position of power can compel him to do it, or your position of authority." No one disputes he was well-versed on the subject, seeing also that he had been Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe during the Second World War. In 1933, Mary Parker Follett, a management scholar far ahead of her time, had likewise underscored the role of followers: "Their part is not merely to follow, they have a very active part to play and that is to keep the leader in control of a situation. Let us not think that we are either leaders or - nothing of much importance."

Alas, with the advent of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, insights such as these were blanked by the craze for captains of industry. Today, 30-40 years into the leadership industry, corporate shelves groan under the weight of handbooks on leadership theory and practice, all meaning to say leadership is a serious professional and personal responsibility. In spite of that, some such as Barbara Kellerman see a historical trajectory from autocracy to democracy that, with fast-paced cultural change, Baby Boomer replacement, and new information and communications technology, may soon end the leadership industry's leader-centrism. The increasingly collective wisdom is that leadership happens in purposeful relationships in culture and context, not in individuals.

Keywords

leadership, followers, industrial relations

Comments

Suggested Citation

Serrat, O. (2014). *Take me to your followers*. Manila: Asian Development Bank.

Required Publisher's Statement

This article was first published by the Asian Development Bank (www.adb.org).



TAKE ME TO YOUR FOLLOWERS

OLIVIER SERRAT, ASIAN DEVELOPMENT BANK

In 1954, Dwight D. Eisenhower, then 34th President of the United States, defined leadership as “... the art of getting someone else to do something that you want done because he wants to do it, not because your position of power can compel him to do it, or your position of authority.” No one disputes he was well-versed on the subject, seeing also that he had been Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe during the Second World War. In 1933, Mary Parker Follett, a management scholar far ahead of her time, had likewise underscored the role of followers: “Their part is not merely to follow, they have a very active part to play and that is to keep the leader in control of a situation. Let us not think that we are either leaders or—nothing of much importance.”

Alas, with the advent of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, insights such as these were blanked by the craze for captains of industry. Today, 30-40 years into the leadership industry, corporate shelves groan under the weight of handbooks on leadership theory and practice, all meaning to say leadership is a serious professional and personal responsibility. In spite of that, some such as Barbara Kellerman see a historical trajectory from autocracy to democracy that, with fast-paced cultural change, Baby Boomer replacement, and new information and communications technology, may soon end the leadership industry's leader-centrism. The increasingly collective wisdom is that leadership happens in purposeful relationships in culture and context, not in individuals.

I. BACK TO FOSSIL FUEL

Anatomically modern humans (*Homo sapiens*) emerged in East Africa approximately 200,000 years ago. They lived in tightly knit nomadic groups of 10–30 persons. They foraged edible plants and caught wild animals. They had nonhierarchical and egalitarian social structures: individuals had no authority over one another and, barring gender, distinctions based on power, prestige, wealth, or rank did not exist. Volunteers came forward when their expertise was needed. Elders were looked to for advice but decisions were consensual. There were no written laws and none of the specialized coercive roles played in more complex societies; customs were transmitted orally.

In the Neolithic Period that began circa 9,500 BC in the Middle East, some nomadic groups made the transition to sedentary life in built-up villages and small towns, then in early chiefdoms and embryonic states, most likely following the appearance of agriculture and domestication of animals. Once launched, the process of agriculture-driven social, economic, and technological expansion led to ever more densely populated and stratified societies. The Neolithic Revolution was de facto the first agricultural revolution and the mother of all subsequent changes, from the Muslim Agricultural Revolution in the 8th–13th centuries to the Digital Revolution that broke out in the late 20th century.

Since the Neolithic Period, without doubt, humans have organized to face a fast-changing environment. However, in the fullness of time, organizing was boosted by the Industrial Revolution. Control, discipline, precision, stability, and especially reliability, came to claim the lion's share of attention. At the turn of the 20th century, approaches to functional management were formulated by such pioneers as Frederick Winslow Taylor, Max Weber, and Henri Fayol. They are in use to this day, suggesting that management itself is a maturing technology that has witnessed few genuine breakthroughs over the last 100 years. But, things will surely not remain this way.

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Three factors will inevitably force innovation in management: they are (i) the unremitting growth of the internet, and the networks of interest and communities of practice it spawns; (ii) globalization, and the new attitudes toward work and its performance that collaboration and competition are engendering; and (iii) workforce demographics, and the war for talent that will erupt as Generation X then Generation Y reach retirement age and the labor pool shrinks in developed markets and some emerging ones.

Aside from shifting the demand for and supply of goods and services, these three factors together are guaranteed to impact the size, composition, and skills of workers, the nature of work and workplace arrangements, and worker compensation. Hierarchies, in particular, will be ruffled: the internet is stimulating thinking about working in groups and propagating radically new forms of organization.

Until recently, the prevailing view of leadership was that it is concentrated, or focused. In organizations, this makes it an input to business processes and performance, dependent on the skillsets and potential of select staff. From this standpoint, followers do what they do best: follow. But, for innovation to thrive in a globalizing world, people need to be immersed in flexible social environments, not chained in cause-and-effect, command and control constructs.

When it comes to knowledge workers, traditional concepts of management seldom work: knowledge workers carry their means of production—their intelligence—with them. In self-organizing teams, members eschew reliance on traditional, positional leadership to spontaneously take the lead. If, as evidence shows, most organizations have reached a point in their evolution at which they no longer need leaders in front and followers at the back, efforts and money would be better spent on fortifying leadership as a mutual, social phenomenon.

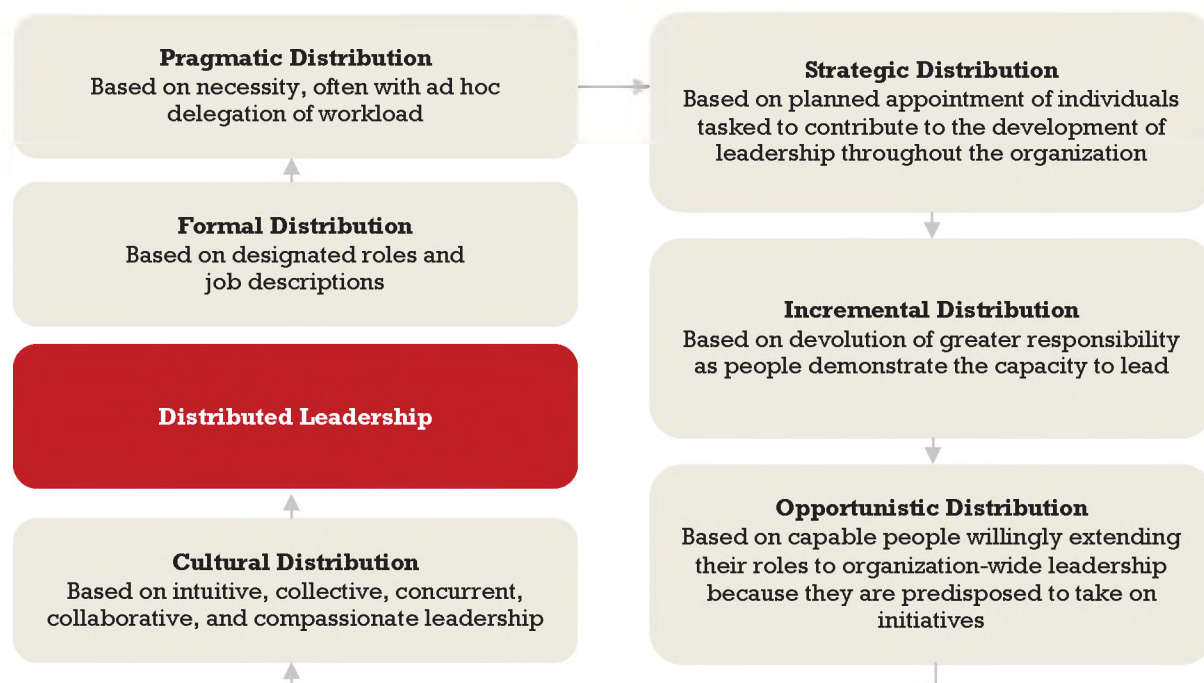


Figure 1: A Taxonomy of Leadership Distribution

Source: Adapted from National College for School Leadership. 2004. *Distributed Leadership in Action*. Nottingham.

The Age of Information demands that we organize better for change. The more successful approaches to organizational structuring are anthropologically sensitive and recognize that human beings are biological entities that cannot be overly controlled. Therefore, interest has grown in a long-forgotten *modus operandi*, nay, *modus vivendi*, that harks back to the Neolithic Period: self-organizing teams. From this radically different perspective, leadership is defined by what one does, not who one is. This means that leadership at all levels matters and must be drawn from, not just be added to, individuals and groups in organizations.

Three elements distinguish distributed leadership from other theories of leadership. **First**, it highlights leadership as an emergent property of a group or network of interacting individuals. **Second**, it suggests openness in the boundaries of leadership. **Third**, it entails that multiple types of expertise are distributed across the many, not the few. Fundamentally, however, it is the first of the three characteristics, viz., leadership as the product of concertive activity, which underscores distributed leadership as an emergent property of a group or network.

Usefully, a recent study of the National College for School Leadership in the United Kingdom has isolated six ways to distribute leadership: (i) formal, (ii) pragmatic, (iii) strategic, (iv) incremental, (v) opportunistic, and (vi) cultural. The categories are neither fixed nor mutually exclusive: each, be it stand-alone or in combination with others, may be appropriate at a given time depending on circumstances. They can also be considered phases in a development process.

II. THE POWER OF LETTING GO

Because the benefits from cooperation normally outstrip those from going it alone, we commonly delegate (and pay for), say, procurement of health care, education, and armed forces. We do so by framing obligations for exchange of valuable things in marketplaces. Most exchanges are straightforward, self-executing matters giving satisfaction, e.g., the sale and purchase of a soft drink; if this were not so, controversy and dispute would soon suffocate society at large and the commerce that nurtures it.

Within organizations, however, delegation is the sharing or transfer of authority and associated responsibility from an employer to an employee. To delegate well in the workplace and help transform that into a place that works for all, it is important to respect contract law, oral contracts, and psychological contracts as well as transactional, implicit, and inferred deals. The act of delegating, meaning, empowering, in organizations calls for and rests on trust: if trust does not come easily in traditional exchange agreements over price and quantity, it is even more difficult to build and maintain when it must also embody elements of responsiveness, creativity, innovation, quality, and reliability in fleeting interpersonal relationships.

Delegation is a fundamental, win-win management process that cannot be readily contracted in the hustle and bustle of the workplace. Hence, within organizations, it had better be understood as a web of tacit governance arrangements across quasi-boundaries. To a much greater extent than contract-based forms of transaction, disaggregated structures require high-powered incentives along a continuum of boss-centered and distributed leadership. The predictors of delegation along that continuum would be distinctions based on the characteristics of supervisors, the real or perceived characteristics of their subordinates, and situational factors.

In the workplace, forces in the supervisor, in the subordinate, and in the situation, determine delegation. The continuum that depicts the locus of authority in decision making is typically anchored at one end by completely autocratic decision making and at the other by a delegation process that permits maximum influence by subordinates. Participation is the midpoint between these polar arrangements.

The Tannenbaum and Schmidt Continuum is the best known model of areas of freedom for supervisors and subordinates. In the range of behaviors the model depicts, a supervisor makes the decision and announces it; sells the decision; presents his ideas and invites questions; presents a tentative decision subject to change; presents the problem, gets suggestions, and then makes the decision; defines the limits and requests the subordinate to make a decision; or permits the subordinate to make decisions within prescribed limits. We are all familiar with the subtle nuances between telling and empowering.



Figure 2: A Continuum of Delegation

Source: Developed from Robert Tannenbaum and Warren Schmidt. 1958. How to Choose a Leadership Pattern. *Harvard Business Review*. March–April

Not surprisingly, literature offers many tips on how one should delegate; linear advice commonly runs thus: (i) define the task, (ii) assess ability and training needs, (iii) explain the reasons, (iv) state the results required, (v) consider the resources needed, (vi) agree on deadline, (vii) support and communicate, and (viii) feedback on results. A little more introspection would certainly help if, as argued earlier, it is wiser to frame delegation as a web of inferred governance arrangements. Following a modicum of soul-searching, supervisors might even say *mea culpa*.

From the health sector, where professionals and patients alike need clear knowledge for decision making and so much rests on nurses, comes pithy advice on delegation. In the United States, the following principles guide delegation of nursing activities, for which nurses must ultimately bear accountability for.

The five rights of delegation are: (i) the right task (one that is delegable); (ii) the right circumstances (appropriate setting, available resources, and other relevant factors considered); (iii) the right person (the right person is delegating the right task to the right person); (iv) the right direction and communication (clear, concise description of the task, including its objective, limits, and expectations); and (v) the right supervision (appropriate monitoring, evaluation, intervention as needed, and feedback). With dedicated effort to engage personnel, organizations can then go the extra mile and turn great followers into leaders.

III. GOING THE EXTRA MILE

Organizations are communities, the members of which want worthwhile jobs that inspire them. Some time ago, traditional organizations recognized that formal relationships cannot be expected to conduce these entirely: implicit employer–employee exchanges matter. Belatedly, they have conceded that perceptions of an organization’s rules, ethos, and capabilities, not just the experience staff have of human resource practices, govern levels of effort and associated degrees of job satisfaction.

More and more, high-performance organizations actively look for win–win solutions that match corporate needs with those of personnel: they examine the question of motivation with a fresh sense of purpose and conviction; better still, they marshal and direct substantial resources to build effective behaviors and relationships.

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Engagement is something everyone can offer; but, it cannot be forced by terms of reference. There are four dimensions to it: (i) cognitive—thinking hard about one’s profession and how one might perform it better; (ii) emotional—feeling good about doing a good job; (iii) social—taking opportunities to discuss work-related improvements with others; and, even if literature rarely mentions it, (iv) physical—mustering the stamina to “go the extra mile.” High levels of engagement benefit organizations: the outcomes include increased profitability, higher productivity, contributions to innovation, and lower staff turnover.

Each organization has distinctive issues. Notwithstanding, the key drivers of staff engagement against which actions can be taken are the following: (i) feeling valued and well informed about what is happening in the organization, (ii) having opportunities to feed views upwards, and (iii) thinking that the immediate supervisor is committed to the organization.

To these ends, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development recommends that employers should strengthen links between engagement, performance, and intention to stay through (i) measures that promote opportunities for upward feedback, (ii) feeling informed about what is going on, managerial commitment to the organization, (iii) managerial fairness in dealing with problems, and (iv) respectful treatment of employees.

That said, embarking on a drive to increase engagement levels should not be taken lightly, bearing in mind the ease with which engagement (much as trust and respect) can be shattered. The Institute for Employment Studies, for one, cautions that attempts to raise engagement levels are likely to founder if all the following building blocks are not in place and working well: (i) good quality first-level management; (ii) two-way communications; (iii) effective internal cooperation; (iv) a development focus; (v) commitment to staff well-being; and (vi) clear, accessible human resource policies and practices, to which managers at all levels are committed.

If much in organizations can be explained by networks of transactions, treating people as cogs in a machine will impair the potential contribution they might make and engender unpleasant feedback. Organizations that understand the what, why, and how of staff engagement and take continuous actions to overcome generic and more specific barriers to it will unleash performance and well-being in the workplace.

Stronger from reconciliation, humanized organizations would be able to say they acted on a blindingly obvious but nevertheless often-overlooked rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. So, how about distributing leadership, delegating authority, and engaging staff so that great followers might follow by leading?

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of the Asian Development Bank, or its Board of Governors or the governments they represent.



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